

# THE SCIENTIFIC OF THE TRADITIONAL FENG SHUI IN SOME ANCIENT VIETNAMESE ARCHITECTURES

## TÍNH KHOA HỌC CỦA PHONG THỦY TRUYỀN THỐNG TRONG MỘT SỐ CÔNG TRÌNH KIẾN TRÚC CỔ VIỆT NAM

Ngo Hong Nang

### Abstract:

Since ancient times, Feng Shui has been the experience of choosing land to build architectural works (Yang part) or make graves (Yin part). Some people consider it superstition but others do not. However, today, it is still widely applied in society. Thus, the question is: Are the elements of Feng Shui applied in some ancient architectures called science? This article presents some issues such as Yin and Yang, the Triple and the Five Elements, some ancient architectural works applying Feng Shui to see its science.

**Keywords:** *Feng Shui, Yin, Yang, Triple, Five Elements.*

**M.Arch. Ngo Hong Nang**

*Architecture Faculty - Mien Tay Construction University*

*Email: ngohongnang@mtu.edu.vn*

*Phone: 0918 357 035*

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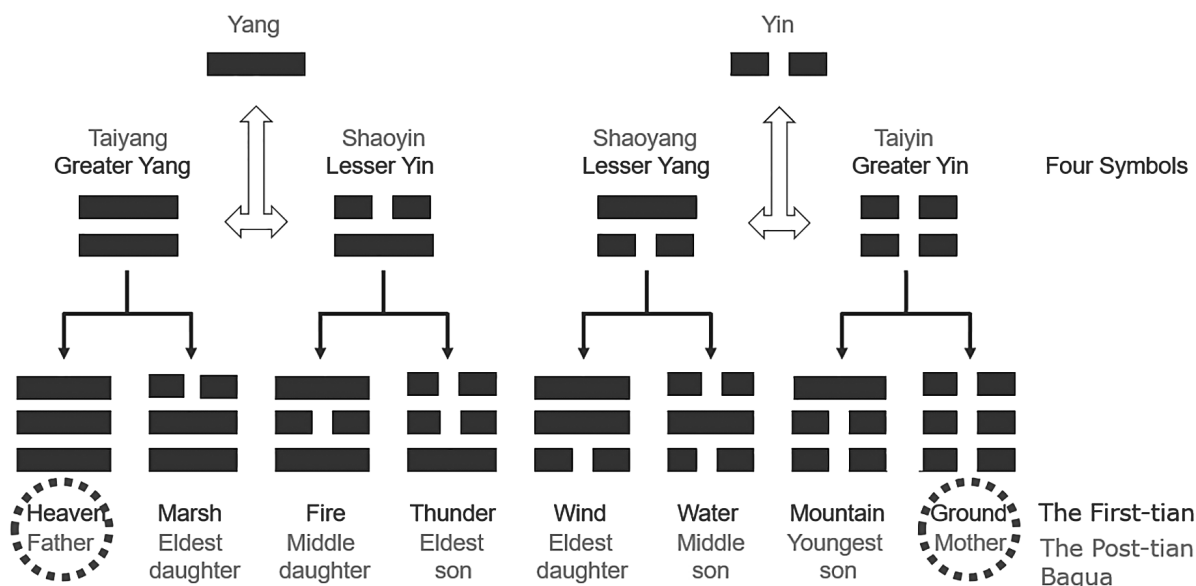
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### 1. Outline of Yin - Yang

Yin - Yang in Chinese characters is 陰 陽, transliterated as /yīn yáng/. According to Prof. Dr. Trần Ngọc Thêm, in “Vietnamese Cultural Foundation”, from ancient Southeast Asian languages, Yin is pronounced is /yīn/, including the words: yana, ina (meaning mother); Yang / yáng/, including the words: giảng, trời... (meaning heaven). Mother is an element in the mother - father opposition, heaven in the ground - heaven pair. The two pairs of (mother - father) and (ground - heaven) are two the most important factors in human reproduction in the agricultural production process in the South, the homeland of wet rice, which is the process of human production and crops. This is also a manifestation of traditional beliefs in Vietnam. Synthetic Vietnamese should gather into a pair of opposites: Mother - Heaven: Yin - Yang, to represent all other pairs of opposites in life, such as: female - male, right - left, white - black, night - day...

One of the grounds for affirming the above idea is that when learning about the Bagua, we can clearly see the two pairs of Mother - Father and Ground - Heaven in the two hexagrams of Pure Yang and Pure Yin, which are Qiankun. The First-tian Bagua of Fairy Tales, a legend created by King Phục Hy, a king found only in legends, describe a natural order. In it, Qian is Heaven, Kun is Ground. The post-tian Bagua is developed by Văn Vương, it describes a social order. In which, Qian is the Father, and the Kun is the Mother (Figure 1).



**Figure 1.** Yin - Yang is the united of two pairs of Ground - Heaven and Mother - Father, which are clearly shown through the models of the First-tian and the Post-tian Bagua [1].

Observing in reality, people discovered the law of Yin and Yang, with the following basic content: In Yin, there is Yang. In Yang there is Yin. Yin and Yang always transform each other. When Yin flourishes, Yang declines, when Yang prospers, Yin declines. Yin becomes maximal and produces Yang, and Yang becomes maximal and produces Yin...

The above rule is also often found in the Vietnamese philosophy of life, an average life philosophy. People rarely allow something to happen to the extreme when it changes its nature. In the architecture of house, the compartments are arranged symmetrically through the middle nave, the ancestral worshiping room, with two sides, one side is male, the other is female...

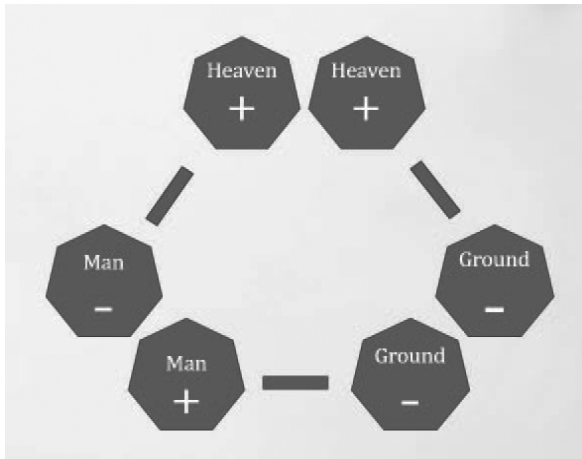


**Figure 2.** Traditional house with three compartments and two wings, with the nave being an ancestral worshiping space, symmetrical on both sides through the nave [2].

## 2. The Triple in Feng Shui

The Triple in Feng Shui is combine of three pairs of yin and yang that share the same elements. For example, in the trio of Heaven - Ground - Man, there are three pairs of Heaven (+) - Ground (-), Man (-) - Heaven (+) and Man (+) - Ground (-) (Figure 3). In which, Heaven is the element that is always positive, Ground is the element that is always negative, People are sometimes negative,

sometimes positive. Thus, the negative or positive nature is not a constant factor but depends on the comparison object and the comparison criteria. The Triple is seen through phenomena in society such as three-factor models: 3-compartments house, house with odd number of compartments, people - space - time, father - mother - child, Son Tinh - Thủy Tinh - Mị Nương, betel nut - areca - lime, the stove with tripod...



**Figure 3.** Formation of the Triple in feng shui

### 3. The Five Elements

The Five Elements were formed by the synthesis of two sets of the Triple, from the selection of land to build houses of the ancient Vietnamese: (1) Choose land (Ground) where there is Water for living and a dry place to live, cooking (Fire); (2) Choose land (Ground) where it is possible to grow crops (Wood) and have harvesting tools (metal tools - Metal). Thus, there are two sets of the Triple: Water - Ground - Fire and Wood - Ground - Metal. In which, people are the center of choosing the land (Ground), people are on the land, so we have the Ground in the center, the remaining four elements are around (F4).



**Figure 4.** The Five Elements model [3]

The Fire element is warm in the South, where the Lạc Hồng birds escape from the cold. The Fire element represents the South, the Phoenix bird

(Phụng), the color red... The Water element is cold in the North, the home of the turtle (Quy). Through the fact that the ancient buildings all face the South and through the Idioms “Tả Thanh Long, Hữu Bạch Hổ” shows that on the left is the Green Dragon (Long) - the Wood element - the East; On the right is the White Tiger (Lân) - the Metal element - the West. Long, Lâm, Quy, Phụng - Tứ Linh (the four sacred creatures) are very popular decorative themes around Vietnamese in ancient times.

### 4. The application of the Five Elements in choosing land for construction works

Vietnamese have the Average life philosophy and they are always living in balance and harmony of Yin and Yang. Thus, when they are arranging houses or palaces, they always kept the principle of “balancing Yin - Yang”, that are the rules: “Minh đường tụ thủy, Hậu chẩm tựa sơn” (There are rivers or streams in front; The back is leaning against the mountains) and “Tả Thanh Long, Hữu Bạch Hổ” (The Green Dragon is on the left; The White Tiger is on the right).

“Minh đường tụ thủy”: Buildings usually face south. The South is the Fire element. The opposite of Fire is Water so to balance Yin - Yang, this place must have spacious and airy rivers and lakes, with good views. This element is always needed for any construction, even today. Rivers and lakes are places to provide moisture, to cool the air... Having a place to build a house facing the river is the dream of many people. Even if there is no river, sometime, people make an artificial lake in the front.

“Hậu chẩm tựa sơn”: The North is the Water element. The Water can be understood as the lagoons or lakes. Contrast to lagoons, lakes (sunken) is the mountains (emerged). This is also based on the principle of harmony Yin - Yang. Besides, if the back of architecture has mountain, it has the place to “rely back” and “it safely look forward” so this is a very necessary factor for any works, especially citadels or palaces. In addition, for houses, it is also a place to cover the cold and dry northeast monsoon, a type of cold and strong wind or toxic wind, not good for health.

“Tả Thanh Long”: The East is the Wood element and its opposite is Ground. The Ground element can be understood as the land or the path.



They have arranged the garden path with winding shape like the Dragon (Wood element). This has been the place for the Dragon to fly... Besides, they have arranged the path to contact the whole works so there have been many empty places to catch the early sun and cool wind.

“Hữu Bạch Hổ”: The West is the Metal element and its opposite is the Wood. The ancient Vietnamese have arranged the Wood at the West to balance Yin - Yang. Wood can be understood as trees and forests as shelters for Tigers. In addition, when we plant trees, the works has much shade at the West. This is a very scientific and reasonable solution.

## 5. Some applications of the Five Elements

### 5.1. Thăng Long – Hà Nội

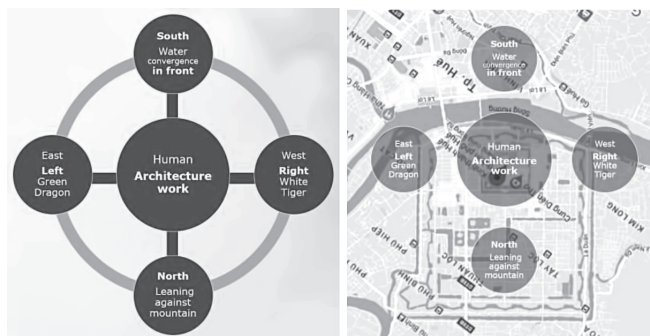
In Lý Công Uẩn Capital Relocation Decree, there is a passage: *“What’s more, Đại La citadel, the former capital of Cao Vương, is in the center of Heaven and Ground, in the position of a Rolling Dragon and a Sitting Tiger; in the middle of the South, the North, the East and the West, with conditions: mountains at the back and rivers in front.”* Thus, the King identified Thăng Long as the place with *“The Green Dragon in the left, The White Tiger in the right”* (*“the position of a Rolling Dragon and a Sitting Tiger”*), mountains at the back and rivers in the front, to ensure *“the converging water”*, and *“the leaning mountain”*.



**Figure 5.** The general terrain of Thăng Long – Hà Nội is the center of the delta; surrounded on three sides by mountainous areas; the front facing the sea. [4]

### 5.2. Huế Citadel

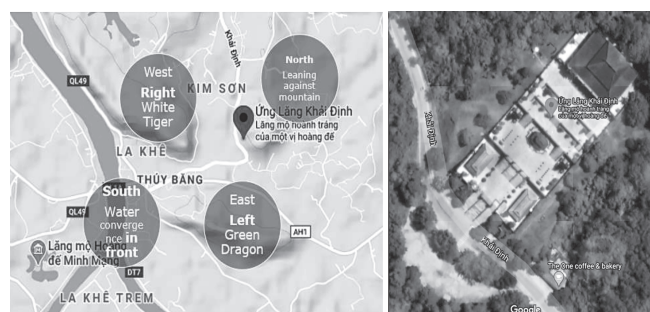
For Huế Citadel, this place meets all the elements of the above mentioned, for example: On the left, there is Hén dune as “Tả Thanh Long”; On the right, there is Dã Viên dune as “Hữu Bạch Hổ”; Hương river is the “Minh đường”; “Hậu chằm” is a logistics area in a very solid Vauban citadel (Figure 6).



**Figure 6.** Five Elements and its application in Huế Citadel.

### 5.3. Khải Định Tomb

In Khải Định Tomb, Feng Shui was also applied very thoroughly. The King has chosen the slopes of Châu Chữ mountain as the location to build the tomb so Châu Chữ mountain was “Hậu chằm”. In this position, there was Châu Ê slot flowing from left to right as “Minh đường tự thủy”. He was taking Chóp Vung and Kim Sơn mountains as “Left Green Dragon” and “Right White Tiger” (Figure 7).



**Figure 7.** Application of Five Elements in Khải Định Tomb [4]

## 6. Conclusion

Thus, through the above content, we can see that most of the traditional Feng Shui elements in architecture are the scientific discoveries and explanations of the ancients about nature

and society, about relationship of man-made factors in the natural environment and especially the relationship between architecture and the environment. Maybe in ancient times, that scientific nature, the knowledge of that time, could not be compared with science now, but it has shown its

profoundness compared to the knowledge of other ordinary people in society association at that time. Thus, our problem today is to distinguish which content is traditional Feng Shui and which content is to take advantage of traditional Feng Shui for profit to avoid and criticize.

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